

THE MADONNA AND HER CHILD

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SYNOPSIS: The story provides glimpses into the Filipino way of dealing with the crisis, the safety of home, the love of family, the kindness of/to strangers-all under the mercy of the pandemic. The first segment deals with Mama Flora as she waits for the arrival of her 19-year-old son Eddie after a three-week lockdown in the city where he boards and works. When Eddie does not show up during the expected time, she frets, panics, like any mother would. To calm her down, her ward Normita challenges her to a crochet contest. Later, a neighbor drops by and shares a harvest of camote and manioc, saying her grandparents, in placing their hope on the root crops, survived the war. Mama Flora's crochet doily is a mess, and as she unravels the wrong stitches, her fears and negative thoughts are also untangled, foreshadowing Eddie's arrival. The second segment deals with Eddie's day-long journey home-on foot. Along the way he encounters, among others, a man who bravely crosses raging river waters just to get home; a couple of elderly scavengers to whose sick and hungry grandchild, whom they had brought to the health center, he gives the birthday cake intended for his mother; and a young guy, to whom at the start of his journey he offered a bottle of drinking water, who reappears across the border and gives him a lift on his motorbike on the last leg of his journey.

"I'LL BE right here when you get home. Be safe on your way," she said and heard him answer "Yes, Mama!" She waited for him to turn off his cell phone before she turned off hers. The sun was just peering behind the cliff, one of the many on the Sierra. Her heart was singing. Finally, after the three-week travel restrictions in the city, Eddie was coming home.

She uttered a prayer for his safe passage, entered the house, and hastily got dressed. If she moved fast enough, she'd be home from the marketplace at 8:30, giving her plenty of time to cook Eddie's favorite dish, *sinigang na karne ng baka* (beef stew), in time for lunch.



"Anything you want from the marketplace, Normita?" she asked, picking up her rattan basket from the chair, where also lay her crochet paraphernalia.

"For Joshua, Mama Flora, a cup noodle," Normita said, softly. She was feeding the dog, Buddy, so called because the name rhymed with "Eddie." Eight years old, she lived with her younger brother, widowed father and blind grandmother ten houses away. With school off, she had been keeping Mama Flora company, helping with the household chores. Mama Flora had taught her how to crochet. "And bones for Buddy, Mama Flora," she added. Eddie doted on her.

At the gate, Mama Flora caught sight of Nelia and her ten-year-old son Boyet, lugging their gardening gear, going up the trail to the foot of the cliff. Nelia and her husband, Nestor, stranded in a construction site somewhere, grew camote and manioc on a plot beside the creek at the base of the cliff. Mother and son would probably spend the whole day there. Mama Flora waved at them, then started down the path that crossed the long stretch of vacant lots, which separated this part of the village from the more active part of the *barangay* (district).

The marketplace was the center of the district, and as she approached the main road, a little out of breath and with a bit of perspiration from the fifteen-minute walk, Mama Flora donned her face mask, then reached for her quarantine pass inside her purse. A *barangay tanod*, standing by the curb in his blue uniform, pointed his thermal scanner on her forehead. He waved away her Q-pass, saying the town was no longer under MECQ.

Mama Flora's mind lurched. Out here was a danger she could not comprehend, though the manifestations were there. Face masks and shields that rendered the wearers incognito. Arrogant district guards who patrolled the streets, barking orders for physical distancing, directing traffic of people and any moving entity; or, if trouble arose, grabbing and dragging the offender to the *barangay* hall. The sari-sari stores were imprisoned behind transparent acetates, with holes just big enough for cash and merchandise to pass through. Ambulant vendors lined the sidewalks, desperate to earn a living, defying the rules.

It confounded Mama Flora, this crisis. All she wanted back were the weekdays with Eddie, two beautiful days together, before he went back to the city, back to his boardinghouse and his job as a merchandiser at one of those huge supermarkets.

She wanted Eddie home, safe from all the viruses and dangers in the world.

Mama Flora queued up at the meat stall for a kilo of beef and two pieces of pig femur bones. Across the street she got a medium-sized unripe papaya from a sidewalk vendor, and from one of the sari-sari stores, four cup noodles. The rest of the ingredients for the *sinigang* she already had at home. There was a guava tree in the backyard, among other vegetable plants.

She left in a hurry. Going past the barren lots, she sighed with relief. She felt safe here, the far end of the village—where she and her neighbors of twenty-odd families led quiet lives. What lay beyond she refused to know, it would only clutter her spirit.

Tony had brought her here—a village in this far-flung district called Silangan, right in the bosom of the Sierra—after they gave up the small leaky apartment in Manila. Eddie was just five years old then, and Tony had wanted a property—which he paid on instalment basis—where he could build a decent one-story house, with a spacious yard to grow vegetables and fruit-bearing trees and tend to them full-time after he retired from military service.

Reaching home, Mama Flora gave one of the bones to Buddy, then instructed Normita to bring the cup noodles to her little brother and return for lunch; by then Eddie would be home.

She changed clothes and busied herself preparing the *sinigang*, so different from other beef stews, in that the recipe concocted by Tony was seasoned not with salt but with a mild extract from the Ilocano *bagoong-isda*, and with the barest of ingredients, so as not to dilute the flavor and aroma of the beef. A frugal version of the *sinigang*, but Eddie had said he could eat the dish everyday without getting tired of it.

All the while Mama Flora kept looking out of the window, on the lookout for Eddie.

At a little past ten, before the *sinigang* fully cooked, she went outside with her cell phone. She pressed Eddie's number, but all she heard was a static. Two more times she dialed, and all she got was a dull hum. This puzzled her, this was so unlike Eddie, cutting off contact with her. She sent him a text message, reentered the house, waited for a few minutes, but no message—or call—came in. Still she gave it the benefit of the doubt. She gave Eddie another hour.

Yet, within the next hour, she went into the yard at least four times, tried to contact him. During the last few weeks, physically separated by the lockdown, they

had depended so much on their cell phones—for proximity, for the comfort of knowing each one was safe and fine, and for the news of what was happening in the city where he was, which she didn't exactly relish. Now, she could not bear the thought of them being cut off from each other. Mama Flora was confused.

At eleven-thirty, as the pot of rice bubbled over the stove, Normita returned, lugging two young coconuts. *Buko* juice to quench Eddie's thirst once he arrived. Perfect! Mama Flora suddenly felt good.

She and Normita had lunch though she made sure she set aside choice portions of the *sinigang* for Eddie. After feeding Buddy, she told Normita to practice her crocheting while she busied herself in the kitchen, washing not only the dishes but also the pots and pans, the sink—if only to keep herself from worrying why Eddie was taking too long to arrive.

Done in the kitchen after an hour, after placing the *sinigang* inside the refrigerator, to be reheated upon Eddie's arrival, she went inside Eddie's room. Everything was in order, no need to fix anything, but just to keep her mind off unwanted thoughts, she fixed everything—twice.

She was getting anxious, and was acutely aware of what was causing it. All the more because Buddy appeared to be getting restless, too, whining softly every now and then.

At half past two, she went outside. Normita had made herself comfortable crocheting on the *papag* (bamboo bed) beside the door. "Why isn't Eddie home yet?" she wondered, on the verge of panic. Horrible scenarios were already playing in her mind. What if— God forbid!

"Don't worry, Mama Flora. Kuya (Big Brother) Eddie might have been held up by something or other on his way here, but he'll be home. And his cell phone, the battery might have been drained."

"Are you sure, Normita?" Mama Flora scanned the footpath outside the gate, hoping Eddie would suddenly appear there. If not, a call from him would be more than enough.

"Yes, I am, Mama Flora. Now, why don't we pass the time waiting for Kuya Eddie by doing a challenge? Crochet your doily and I'll crochet mine. Let's see who'll finish first."

A young girl's silly idea, but Mama Flora took the challenge, if only to calm herself. She went inside the house, picked up her crochet hook and the cone of thread and sat by the window.

Count before you leap, so Mama Flora counted her stitches, the rounds she made. Chain four, one, two, three, four... two single crochet, one, two... chain three, one, two, three... Every now and then, she would reach down and pet Buddy who kept twitching and whining as he slept at her feet. She knew he missed his hooman, just as much as she missed Eddie more.

Once he got home, she would convince Eddie to forego his job in the city, at least until the crisis was over, because in God's time it will go away. They had provisions enough to last them until things became as they were again; her pension will see them through. She didn't want Eddie taking the risk of getting sick with whatever that made people die just to earn and save enough money to buy a motorbike; he will have it, in time.

As she counted, and made the rounds of stitches, Mama Flora waited; she waited and waited and waited—patiently, but in vain. Now she was getting stressed out, panic-stricken.

Yes, Eddie will have his motorbike; travel will be faster, easier, and she could even ride pillion with him. His dream of owning a mini grocery store in this part of the district will also come to pass, the reason why he took that job as a merchandiser, to learn the ropes of operating a grocery store. They will lead a happy existence, albeit ordinary and quiet, not wanting more than what they needed, as 2nd Lt. Tony Mangundayao had wanted it to be.

She heard Normita's muffled greeting outside the door, followed by her call. Mama Flora stepped outside. Nelia and her son Boyet were standing by the *papag*, down from the fields.

"These are not much, Mama Flora, but it will give us great pleasure to share them with you," Nelia said as she began pulling out roots of manioc and several pieces of camote from her basket, placing them on the *papag*.

"Oh, Nelia, you didn't have to bother," Mama Flora said, petting Boyet's head, reminding herself to send Normita later to their house, with perhaps a packet of biscuits or whatever was in the cupboard that would delight the boy.

Normita scooped up the crops on a plastic basin and brought them inside the house.



"Is Eddie home yet?" Nelia asked.

Mama Flora's heart raced. In an hour the sun will be down—and there was not a single sign of Eddie yet. She was next to going berserk, she had camouflaged her fears with her crochet rounds and stitches. "I wish— I hope—" she began. She refused to think of what might have happened to Eddie. He is just nineteen, she thought, shuddering in dread. "Thank you for the camote and manioc, Nelia," she said, her voice almost croaking.

"I always remember what my great-grandfather said. His whole family survived the war by eating camote and manioc. Because of them root crops, they hoped to survive, and they did."

"May God bless you and your family, Nelia." Mama Flora stood there until mother and son disappeared from sight. Something significant stirred in her. She stepped inside the house and found Normita examining her doily.

"Look, Mama Flora, your work is full of mistakes!"

"What?!" Mama Flora was incredulous. She examined her work, it was indeed a total mess. She wanted to laugh—and cry. "What to do now, Normita?" she asked, shame-faced.

"Unravel the stitches, Mama Flora."

Mama Flora sat down, and as she started unraveling the stitches, she felt an exhilarating peace descend on her and envelop her whole being, displacing all the anxiety, panic, fear and all the terrible thoughts and feelings she had hooked into her work as she waited for Eddie's arrival.

She felt her bosom expand, and as the base ring of the crochet totally disappeared, Buddy suddenly sprang up, and with tail wagging vigorously, bolted out of the door.

"Mama!"

It was the sweetest call Mama Flora had ever heard in this time of crisis, echoing through the whole universe of the village and reverberating back to the very core of her soul. And for the first time since the virus sowed terror, it occurred to her what the pandemic was all about.

"I'LL BE right here when you get home. Be safe on your way," he heard her say, and he replied "Yes, Mama," then turned off his mobile phone and continued walking.

He adjusted his backpack and face mask. The surroundings, at least in this part of Bayan, were a bit damp, perhaps because it rained quite hard last night. The streets were less dense now than before the pandemic. Less vehicles, too, and he wondered if he'd be able to get a ride home.

As he turned the curb, he saw a guy bend over a puddle, about to lap up the rain water. "No!" he called out, rushing forward. The guy gazed up at him intently as he took out the bottle of mineral water from the pocket of his backpack and hand it over. "Take this—"

"Eddie!"

Eddie turned to look and saw Erwin, a coworker at the supermarket, slowing down on his bicycle across the street. "Got to go," he said to the guy, and ran after Erwin. "Drop me off at the bank!" he said and quickly jumped on the back seat of the bicycle.

"Be wary of the *tanods*," Erwin warned, referring to the district guards who, on patrol, would randomly haul off pillion-riding couples to the district hall and detain them.

Eddie looked around, said, "The coast is clear."

"Hey," Erwin said as they approached the main road, "are you serious about going home? I don't think you'll get a ride."

"I'll take my chances," Eddie said. Deep inside him, he felt unsafe out in the open, the reason why he hungered for home. "There's no place like home, man."

"Cool, man." Erwin chuckled. He slowed down the bicycle.

"Thanks a lot," Eddie said of the four-block free ride as he slid off the backseat.

There was an unusually quiet queue at the ATM, extending two blocks down the road, not without physical distancing. Eddie decided, after a pause, to just move on. Anyway, there were two other branches of the bank in the Vista district, near the border.

The morning sun was already up, drying up the surroundings. Eddie took out his towelette, and a handkerchief, which he fashioned into a headgear to cover his head. Save for privately owned vehicles, he saw no passenger jeepneys. The traffic was mainly of people who, like him now, were travelling on foot, not unlike an exodus, something he had never seen before.

He braced himself for the long walk. It would probably take him two hours to get to La Delmar, the hub of the next district. From there, another hour to Vista, where, he hoped, he'd do some last-minute tasks, and then, because the adjacent town, where he and his mother lived, was no longer a part of the capital region and therefore not under strict pandemic regulations, probably get a ride home, perhaps an *habal-habal* or a *kolorum* van.

He had walked nonstop, so when he reached La Delmar, he was already drenched with sweat, was very thirsty and hot, sweat trickling from his balls down to his thighs. And he could hardly breathe beneath his damp face mask. He made the sign of the cross as he walked past the church entrance, to the street beside it, where, to his delight, he found the regulars: the vendors hawking their wares—albeit observing protocol. He saw a young woman vending bottles of mineral water, propped on a small table beside a portable ice bucket. Despite her face mask, Eddie recognized her, and she seemed likewise. “How’s business?” he asked her.

“Barely surviving after the restaurant shut down,” she said, albeit without bitterness. Yes, she was one of waitresses at the restaurant across the supermarket where he worked. He and Erwin, and their co-employees, were lucky to keep their jobs despite truncated work hours.

With the bottle of water, he moved down the line of vendors, looking for—there it was an open stall of face masks and shields. He replaced his damp mask with a face shield, bought a spare mask, then hitched it and the other mask on his backpack. After paying for each item, he realized he had less than two hundred bucks. Time to withdraw some dough.

Two blocks down the road was a branch of the bank. As he waited in line at the ATM, he decided to call home. To his horror, his mobile phone was dead! What a fool he was—he forgot to charge it last night. For a moment he panicked—his mama would be worried to death for the noncontact! Nevertheless, he willed himself to calm down. It was not yet the end of the world, he'd make it home, and his mama would understand.

He withdrew enough cash, then proceeded on his way. The exodus of people had not diminished, and he passed by signages warning against the virus, familiar places and establishments, most of which were closed. Every now and then, a mobile patrol swung by; if not, overweight cops riding motorbikes in tandem.

By the time he got to Vista it was already midday. The bakery across the hospital was closed, but he knew there was a bakeshop down the street. Because a sign read NO FACE MASK, NO SERVICE, he replaced his face shield with his newly bought face mask, then told the amused salesclerk he wanted a cake, pointing at the medium-sized flirty-looking one on display. She said, however, that the cake decorator wouldn't be in until one o'clock, would he wait until then? Of course—anything for his mama! He paid in advance, and said to embed "Happy Birthday, Mama!" on the cake.

He searched for lunch and found a *carinderia* at the back of the hospital, but it catered to take-out food only. He went further and saw a street food vendor. Doubly hungry, he spent more than a hundred bucks for the barbecue and the dumplings, all of which he washed down with two glasses of *gulaman* while standing up. Before he left, he asked about the vans bound for Silangan. "There'd been some arrests, so they're lying low right now," the vendor said. "You can take the *habal-habal* at the jeepney terminal instead."

"Thanks," Eddie said.

He spent the next hour sitting on a broken wooden bench at the shady mini park a block away from the hospital, taking his sneakers and socks off to relax and rest his feet, wiggling his toes and kneading his soles, loosening the tightness in his leg muscles.

At ten minutes after one, feeling a bit refreshed, he walked back to the bakeshop and picked up the cake, all done, its box secured tightly with a red ribbon.

Carrying the box carefully, he crossed the two streets to the jeepney terminal, deserted save for some five or so people under the shed, waiting for *habal-habal* rides. The dispatcher said there were only three motorbikes ferrying passengers, and Eddie had to wait for forty-five minutes before he had his turn. Learning he was Silangan-bound, the bike driver said, "I can only drop you off at Ruiz street, *habal-habals* are forbidden to go beyond that point. At ten this morning, Monteville was put under local lockdown, no one's allowed to pass through that area. There's a police outpost a stone's throw away from the bridge. If they'll allow you passage,



you're lucky, you can get another *habal-habal* ride beyond Monteville and be in Silangan in twenty minutes. If not, you'll have to take a detour by way of the bridge in Karingal."

It was bad news, but Eddie had no choice. He allowed the driver to put on the helmet on him. The box of cake hung delicately from his left hand as his right hand held on to the back rail of the motorbike. The first part of the ride, they struggled along the thick traffic of private vehicles bound for Karingal; the next was spent navigating the winding climb up the terrain.

Eddie paid the *habal-habal* driver double the usual fare then walked the remaining fifty meters of the way. Approaching the outpost, he saw one of the policemen waving away a thin man in shorts and flipflops, carrying a bulky tote bag, who turned towards the dirt road on the left. Beyond was the landmark border: the concrete bridge, heavily blockaded.

The same policeman told Eddie that if he lived in Monteville, he had to turn back and return after the quarantine period was over, but if he lived beyond it, there was no way he'd be allowed to pass through; neither those who lived uphill were allowed to pass this way. "If you insist, you'll get arrested. Take the detour," the policeman said, gesturing after the thin man.

Eddie did as advised; he quickened his steps until he fell alongside the thin man. To their right was the river. "Sorry," he said to the man, "I'm not familiar with this route, I'm going home to Silangan."

"Follow this dirt road," the thin man said under his mask. "At the end of it, you'll come to a path that goes down the side of the health center of the next *barangay*, it will lead you to the main road. Keep walking until you get to the bridge in Karingal. You'll get home from there."

Eddie noticed that the thin man kept looking back, as if checking on the outpost. After a prolonged silence, the man suddenly said, "I'm getting off here," eliciting a puzzled look from Eddie. "Look, we're just squatters, at the back of Monteville," the man added. "We're not a part of the lockdown, and the only other way I can get home is to cross this part of the river."

"The water's deep, can't you see?" Eddie protested, alarmed.

"Not too deep to drown me," the thin man said, rushing down the rugged bank.

Eddie held his breath as he watched the man hurdle the raging current, the bulky tote bag and his flipflops held above his head, slowly sinking to his chest and then slowly emerging from the depths until he reached the opposite bank, dripping wet but safe. Eddie sighed with relief.

He found a shady spot at the end of the dirt road. The foliage fanned a cool wind from the river. In the distance was the blue-and-green Sierra, so close to home, yet still a long way to go. Eddie put down the box of cake, sat down on a rock, took off his mask and headgear, and for the umpteenth time rubbed his hands with alcohol and wiped himself with his towelette. He took several sips from the bottle of mineral water. After several minutes, ready for the next leg of the journey, he picked up the box and went down the path. With the health center in sight, he put on his face mask and headgear again.

At the main road, Eddie fell in step with an elderly couple pushing a wooden cart. One end of the cart was covered with a blanket, the other end revealed a pile of junk. Scavengers, though they looked quite clean. They wore identical face masks and wide-brimmed hats.

"Good afternoon," Eddie said when they nodded to him. They looked in their fifties.

"Good afternoon to you, too," the woman answered. Her voice was alive, but Eddie could see in her and the man's eyes undisguised fatigue—and determination. "You live around here?"

"Across the border," Eddie said. "Way past the bridge. What about you, Sir, Madam?"

"Far end of this district," the man answered. "Close to the boundary with the next city."

Eddie took the conversation as an invitation to walk with them, but after negotiating the next four blocks in silence, the man said, "We're turning left here." As the man made a move to swivel the cart, Eddie heard a whimper, a wail. The couple looked at one another before the woman pulled off the blanket from the cart and reached down to pat the source of the whimper.

On the floor was a makeshift bed, a pillow and a thin blanket, on which a little boy, about two years old, had sat up, looking up with supplication. "Grandma, I'm hungry."



Eddie stood back, mouth agape. He tried his best to contain himself. Ever since the restrictions of the pandemic were upheld, he had not seen a kid out in the open, like this one.

"He had been running a fever for days now, so we brought him to the health center," the grandmother said. Also on the bed were a bottle of half-consumed mineral water and medicines.

"His mother is at home, pregnant, looking after another child," the man said.

The boy whimpered again. "Grandpa, I'm hungry."

Eddie did not have to think twice when he set down the box of cake beside the boy. At that moment, he knew that nobody else but this hungry little sick boy deserved the cake.

The old man gazed intently at him before he spoke: "At my age I haven't much time to live, but from now on I will always look for the young man with a birthmark above his brow, and when I see it, God will tell me it is you, and you shall have my infinite gratitude."

"We are poor, almost destitute," the old woman said, "but each day we try our best to do one good deed for another, and today you did it for us."

There was no need for any more words. Eddie took a step forward, hugged the old man, and then the old woman. He bowed to them politely, waved good-bye to them, and moved on.

Several blocks past, he came to the bridge. Here was a checkpoint, manned not by cops but soldiers. Amid the traffic of private vehicles, Eddie and the other pedestrians were told to cool down under the shade for a few minutes before undergoing the thermal scan.

"Thirty-six-point-five," the young soldier who took his temperature said, then told him to present his identification card or proof of residency to the soldiers at the other end of the bridge.

He ended up with a middle-aged soldier, with weary but sympathetic eyes, and to whom he respectfully doffed his headgear, as soldiers often did. "Are you, by any chance, related to Second Lieutenant Antonino Mangundayao?" the soldier asked after looking at his ID.

"He was my father, Sir," Eddie said, focusing on the nameplate before him.

"An honest soldier, filled with so much integrity it took him years to earn ranks. Damnation to the drug-crazed cops who took away his life. Give my regards to your mother."

"I will, Sir," Eddie said, a lump in his throat—2nd Lieutenant, the rank awarded to his father posthumously. "And thank you very much, First Sergeant Dacanay."

"On your way, my boy."

Eddie did. It was now close to four. He had crossed the border, he was now in Karingal, the district before Silangan. All he had to conquer now was the remaining three kilometers of the way, but knowing he was already half-home, he could easily ace the rest of the journey.

But there was still one other thing, the other significant thing.

He was in the commercial part of the district. There must be at least one or two among the establishments on either side of the road. He was already at the edge of the area when he saw one. Aside from the birthday cake, he'd also get something for Normita, like a box of cookies.

He did not have to wait long for the cake decorator to embed "Happy Birthday, Mama!" on the cake, and as he descended the three concrete steps from the façade of the bakeshop, a motorcycle whisked by. Ten paces off, he realized it had turned back and had blocked his way.

"Yes, it's you," the rider gushed. "That birthmark above your brow. You didn't give me time to thank you. Do you remember the bottle of mineral water in Bayan this morning?"

"Yes, I do now," Eddie said, unconsciously touching his birthmark.

"I live here in Karingal. After you, I got a second chance at luck, hitching a ride in a friend's car," the guy said. "If you're bound for Silangan, I can give you a lift as far as the Silangan *tanods* would allow. Don't worry, we have relaxed restrictions here. I'm JC."

"Eddie." Eddie got on the backseat of the motorbike, the box of cake delicately balanced on his thigh. JC pulled his other hand around his abdomen and told him to hold on tight.

Here, under the shade of endless trees, the ride to Silangan was comfortable and breezy, the road winding gently onto the soft slope of the Sierra, unlike the rugged steepness that lay beyond Monteville, on the other side of town. Under JC's smooth driving, Eddie felt safe.

But then, towards the end of the road, the Silangan *tanods* came into view.

JC hit the brakes. Eddie got off the bike, and as he stood back to say thank you, JC got off as well and, without warning, drew him into a tight hug. "Thanks for the drink of life."

Eddie's mind raced. He stood there until after JC had maneuvered his motorbike for the return trip to Karingal. He felt his chest expand. JC's hug confirmed the legitimacy of the hugs he gave the old couple—and all the hugs he will receive, and will give, in the future.

"Eddie!" someone called, a girl whose voice he liked. "How are you?"

"Good!" he shouted back, which he was, as he took the last few steps leading home, past the ambulant vendors, the meat shop, the acetate-covered stores, the district guards.

In an hour the sun will be down. It had taken him one whole day to accomplish what he usually did in an hour and a half sans pandemic. Almost in a run, he navigated the long stretch of vacant lots. At the house gate, he paused and looked back—at the familiar path, at the events and the people he had encountered on his way home, all of which and whom shall forever be a part of him. His whole body ached, every bit of flesh sore, tendons and ligaments numb—but his heart was full. He took off his mask—and freely breathed the air of life. Grasping the box of cake with both hands, he hollered the singular word that meant he was home, safe from all the pandemics in the world:

"Mama!"